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ABSTRACT

The new realism in literature, revealing virtual extinction of literary taboos, is probably a positive development in offering to middle and high school students some topics and attitudes which more accurately reflect the realities they face. However, the younger reader should be protected more, especially from the violence illustrated in some contemporary picture books. Although texts in these books are often simple and mildly amusing, the drawings too frequently portray the real world out of control--a situation especially threatening to the young child. Since a child is born with potential both for aggression and cruelty and for showing gentleness and compassion, his earliest literary experiences should counter popular glorification of violence with a balancing, humanizing effect. (JM)

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THEMES OF VIOLENCE IN PICTURE BOOKS

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The literary taboo is practically extinct. It is quickly following the dodo and the whooping crane into eternal oblivion. If you don't believe me, check tonight's amusement pages. What was formerly available only in rather grainy 8mm film shown at private parties, is now available on wide screen, in glorious color and accessible to anyone who can do a passing fair imitation of a seventeen year old.

Virtually anything can be set in type nowadays -- and is. You can find it prominently displayed at your local newstand. The traditional liberal argument against censorship maintains that an adult should be able to read anything and that his reading matter should not be determined by what is suitable fare for a thirteen year old. Such a position is unassailable although its converse might well be challenged: should what is suitable, or at least desired by an adult, be found in the literature of thirteen year olds?

It is possible that we have gone from a ludicrous overprotection of all of society to providing no protection at all. The content of junior fiction has altered drastically in the past few years. Not too long ago fiction for young people rarely ever produced a character who was sufficiently provoked to utter the word "damn". Rarely did anyone ever smoke or drink or swear or speak with grammatical carelessness. Characters conducted their lives well within the professed value system of small-town, middle-class America. Family members provided each other with strong emotional support, people were clearly identifiable as "good" or "bad", socially created problems were easily solved when the "good" person was located who could put things right. Serious conflicts, when they appeared, were amenable to simplistic solutions. The real crisis in the life of a migrant worker's child is passed when his family is given permission to take up residence in an abandoned bus.[1] Racial

discrimination disolves when "good" people get to work on the problem The unwed mother, though more to be pitied than censured, paid a terrible price for her one mistake (usually made under the unaccustomed influence of liquor). Her tragic tale served as a warning for any tempted young girl, though society was condemned for its callous attitude toward the innocent child.

Well, times have changed. Stories about pre-marital sex abound. Although most are frankly condemnatory, and one Bonnie Jo, Go Home[2] grotesquely chronicles the incredible horrors a young girl endures as she seeks an abortion, one at least, Mom, the Wolf Man and Me[3] seems to think pre-marital sex rather a good idea. I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip[4] relates a brief homosexual incident between two young boys. The Outsiders[5] concerns gang violence. Dorp Dead[6] and The Planet of Junior Brown[7] have characters who are clearly severly emotionally disturbed, in the former case frankly sadistic. Stories of alienation and rejection are too numerous to list. The world of drugs has emerged as a major theme during the past five years. Thus topics and attitudes once taboo are now standard fare. On balance, and despite some really terrible books in the field, the new openness is probably a positive development. Too many of our children must cope with a world which is more traumatizing than anything available in their literature. Stories of more innocent times and more gentle folk don't reflect their world and offer few insights and scarce relief.

While the new realism offers much to the middle and high school student it is probable that we should be more protective of the young child. Admittedly life is earnest and life is real, but could not some of the earnestness and the more threatening aspects of reality be deferred for a while at least? Recently several picture books have appeared which have acts of violence as a central theme. It can be claimed that violence exists in the best of children's stories.

After all, the wicked witch in Hansel and Gretel is shoved into the oven and presumably cooked to a cinder. The wolf who pursued the three little pigs drops through the chimney and into a cauldron of boiling water. The giant chases Jack down the beanstalk, falls and is killed. All violent ends, but in most versions dealt with in one sentence. Violence is neither the focus nor a major theme of the story; it is rather the evidence of a rather crude justice and a neat way of tying up loose ends.

The incidence of violence in some contemporary picture books for young children is startlingly different. The quantity, the treatment, and the importance it has suggests such books might be subjected to further evaluation.

Bang, Bang You're Dead[8] is a story of a group of children playing war. They meet regularly at a hill and pretend to shoot and be shot. After play, they leave together, friends as before. After all, it is just a game. One day a new group of kids show up. They claim the hill for their own and the two factions decide to meet the next day and fight it out. They meet, armed with sticks and stones, prepared for battle.

"There were screams, yells, blood and pain. It was awful. There was a terrible moaning and groaning. James looked around. No one was fighting. They all lay hurting."

"This isn't any fun," observes one of the more astute characters. All agree. Apparently such behavior is not the most judicious way to settle their differences. All decide, rather piously, not to fight, but to share the hill when they play war. "Real war?" asks one character. "No, you know," said James. "Bang, Bang, You're Dead."

The moral is clear: don't fight. Settle your differences peacefully. The jacket blub claims that the book "simply and effectively presents a child's

first discovery of the reality of war." The publisher, representative of a profession never known for modesty, is making rather too strong a case. He may confuse the various versions of cops and robbers with real war, but few children do. The book does purport to be a plea for peace on the neighborhood, if not the global level. What then can be objectionable? In a twenty-nine page book there are nine pages and over thirty individual sketches of fighting or bruised and bleeding children. For a book which promotes peace, there does seem to be an excessive dwelling upon and depiction of pain and violence.

The appearance of violence in The Beast of Monsieur Racine[9] is handled very differently. The story is of a retired tax collector who finds pears are stolen from his tree. He determines to catch the culprit who turns out to be a strange beast. The two become friends. M. Racine studies the beast, a creature previously unknown to science whose discovery generates great excitement. M. Racine is invited to address the academy of scientists. During his speech the beast begins to giggle uncontrollably, throws off its outer skin and reveals itself as two small children who have hidden in this costume as a joke. Their jest creates a riot in the gallery and among the crowds waiting outside. M. Racine, however, finds their prank very amusing and he and the children remain friends.

The text is simple and mildly amusing. The author pokes fun at the solemnity and pompousness of learned societies and celebrates the friendship his hero has exchanged for his former solitude. But the illustrations tell a very different story. When M. Racine first encounters the beast and again when the two are picnicing, a bloody axe appears stuck in a tree stump. A fox runs by with a live rabbit in his mouth. In other pictures a hobo enters the scene with a severed foot in a sack; a cage falls, apparently soon to crush two men; a porter walks through a train station carrying a trunk, dripping blood, a skull and crossbones painted on the front; a fire breaks out on stage during the speech at the academy; a man topples over exposing his artificial leg; a blind

man raises his white cane in rage; outside a man breaks a chair over a woman's head; a woman jabs her artificial arm into a man's mouth, a man points to an umbrella jammed into his head; a policeman points to his empty coat sleeve - his hand is missing; a crowd deliberately overturns a bus.

The pictures as well as the narration are lighthearted and frivolous, although the tone of the book is humorous, the illustrations portray the real world out of control, a situation especially threatening to the young child. This is not the world of fantasy; there are no witches, ogres, or giants. These are human beings behaving in aggressive, hostile, and murderous ways - and the young reader is invited to share in the fun.

In Through the Window[10] there is only one incident of violence, but one is quite enough. What is significant in this book is not so much the violence, but the main character's response to it. Joseph watches events on the street from his front window. An old woman lives down the street with her dog. One day the horses from a nearby brewery get loose and come galloping down the street. After they pass the old woman picks up her dog who lies limp in her arms. The old woman is bent over, apparently in sorrow. People on the street gesture toward her helplessly. Joseph observes all this. He breathes on the window and in the mist his breath creates he draws a stick figure of a woman carrying a dog in her arms - and they are both grinning from ear to ear.

It should be noted that this is a picture book for the very young child. It is listed in standard reference tools as suited to a child from kindergarten to third grade. How can such a young child possibly interpret this kind of bizarre response? Is Joseph denying the death of the dog? Is he indicating happiness in spite of, or possibly because of the dog's death? What value is there in such a book?

The Hunter, The Tick and the Gumberoo[11] relates the tale of a hunter who tracks the gumberoo, a fierce and ferocious animal. During his search he sees a rabbit and a quail, both of which he shoots. Soon he feels an itch on the side of his face. A leathery lump begins to grow there. The lump encompasses the tick which increases enormously in size, devours the hunters game and demand more. The hunter becomes desperate and determines to destroy this monstrous thing.

> The hunter had no way of knowing where to aim for now the tick seemed larger than a bear, with a thick round leathery body that mushroomed like a dark cloud over him.
>
> Trembling, he raised his rifle and tried with all his skill to take careful aim and fire.
>
> Some time later, two hunters happened to cross the ground where the body of a man lay, clutching a rifle in his hand. He had two rabbits and a quail tied to his belt, a bullet hole through the center of his head, and on the side of his face was a speck-like, brown wood tick.

That man destroys his own life in the relentless destruction of wildlife is a tenable position and a theme suitable for a child's book. Whether it should be presented to the young reader through the vivid imagery of a particularly horrible suicide is certainly questionable.

The human child is born with the potential for agression, cruelty and violence; he is also born with the capacity for kindness, gentleness, and compassion;which characteristics will develop and predominate depend on the totality of his experiences. The direct, personal experiences are certainly the most formative, but the indirect, vicarious experiences also shape and mold his value system and behavioral patterns. The popular culture is replete with instances of the glorification of violence; it is hoped that the child's earliest literary experiences might contribute to a counterbalancing, humanizing effect.

FOOTNOTES

1. Shotwell, Louise. Roosevelt Grady, New York: World, 1963.

2. Eyerly, Janet. Bonnie Jo, Go Home, New York: Lippincott, 1972.

3. Klein, Norma. Mom, The Wolf Man and Me. New York: Pantheon, 1972.

4. Donovan, John. I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip. New York: Harper and Row, 1969.

5. Hinton, S. E. The Outsiders, 1967. New York: Viking.

6. Cunningham, Julia. Dorp Dead. New York: Pantheon Books, 1965.

7. Hamilton, Virginia. The Planet of Jr. Brown. New York: Macmillan, 1971.

8. Fitzhugh, Louise and Sandra Scoppettone. Bang, Bang, You're Dead. New York: Harper and Row, 1969.

9. Ungerer, Tomi. The Beast of Monsieur Racine. New York: Farrar, Straus and Geraux, 1971.

10. Keeping, Charles. Through the Window. New York: Franklin Watts, 1970.

11. Mendoza, George. The Hunter, the Tick and the Gumberoo. New York: Cowles, 1971.